

1994

Salvage

Marina Warner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Warner, Marina, *Salvage*, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/91>

Salvage

Abstract

The only other woman living in the hotel besides Kate wasn't a guest, but the hotelier's girlfriend, and she waited on him with quiet ceremony each night as he presided over the restaurant from the corner of the dark inner room behind the bar. A pied-noir, he'd come out to this corner of the colonies with the first strangers' army a long time ago, and he too had kept the flowery manners of the past, and a formal mode of speech. She never sat down with him, but now and then disappeared behind a curtain, where, it was said, she also fixed pipes for him to smoke, later. The ropes standing out on the backs of his hands betrayed how the circulation of his blood had slowed right down.

MARINA WARNER

Salvage

(After Tiepolo's *The Finding of Moses*: Exodus 2: 4-9)

The only other woman living in the hotel besides Kate wasn't a guest, but the hotelier's girlfriend, and she waited on him with quiet ceremony each night as he presided over the restaurant from the corner of the dark inner room behind the bar. A *pied-noir*, he'd come out to this corner of the colonies with the first strangers' army a long time ago, and he too had kept the flowery manners of the past, and a formal mode of speech. She never sat down with him, but now and then disappeared behind a curtain, where, it was said, she also fixed pipes for him to smoke, later. The ropes standing out on the backs of his hands betrayed how the circulation of his blood had slowed right down.

There were a few other women, younger than Kate, who frequented the veranda of the hotel; they weren't admitted into the dining room, or to the hotel's inner courtyard. It was easy, once inside, to forget that a war was going on, as a broad-leafed frangipani tree spread scented shade on the tables set out underneath and dropped waxy flowers on to the undiminished fine linen of earlier days, while croissants were brought warm from the oven by the cook; he, too, had learned his trade from the former power. The other women were kept outside. They waited for customers at the *gueridons* on the veranda, with fizzy drinks from bottles with famous American brand names. You could tell from the cap, which was stamped off-register by hand, that they weren't the real thing.

Kate was shown the difference during the first days of her stay in the city, and she soon learned on her own account how everything was used more than once, passed from hand to hand, leaving a tiny dole of wealth behind as it went. Imitation wasn't really the word. Nor was fake, or cheat. It was more that things were adapted. Taken, named, made to resemble, to belong to a family of other things that offered them hospitality and added value. Salvaged.

She'd arrived in the final spasm of the counter-insurgents' offensive and she was to stay to within a few days of their success; she'd come because the man she'd recently married was reporting there for a London paper, and seeing the news of mounting catastrophe after he'd left had made her so frightened for his safety, she chose to join him. Passing the billboards made her imagine worse terrors than she would ever come across in

reality – she was right in some ways. But it had been a risk, less on account of the danger the war presented than the nuisance she might become to him, as indeed it turned out. Her female presence undercut his heroic witness to the general savagery, the regime's reprisals, the horror of the rebels' attacks. Though the city would fall, it was at that time still the most protected fortress of the whole country, out of range of the rebel army's artillery, under strict curfew from dusk to dawn and seething with soldiers of the allied armies come to help save the incumbent government. She loved her husband much more than he requited, and because she was young and girlish with it, she felt that life had dealt her a hand with undue generosity. So she liked to provoke his cold impatience and prove her devotion by forgiving it and loving him the more.

One of the other journalists in the hotel played go-between on her behalf; after that, she befriended two of the bargirls, learned their first names, Solange and Noelle, and went to eat with them off formica and steel tables, bowls of spicy soup and dishes of fried fish after – sometimes, for it was the rainy season – plunging knee deep through the monsoon flood that swelled with tidal power in the streets every evening, to reach the place down some alley the girls knew was cheap and good. Kate paid, it was the least she could do. She would see Solange and Noelle separately, and she never sat with them on the veranda for fear of causing embarrassment: a soldier might think she was turning a trick as well, and as she was white, she offered unfair competition – though in her own country she was considered a young woman with pleasant features, but certainly no siren. Solange giggled when they walked along side by side, for Kate soon outstripped her and then had to stop to let her draw level again; Kate was wearing cotton trousers and sandals in the heat, and her usual gait was a stride, whereas Solange wore the country's traditional costume, silk, tight-fitting, and she had tiny beaded sandals with gilt high heels, so that she furred and unfurled when she moved like the kite-tails that streamed from some of the yards in the city where children cut out relief agency ricebags and stitched them to a frame of jetsam. This was another of their reclamations, another secondary use, another salvage, transforming the foreign into the native.

The journalist who had effected Kate's introduction to Solange – it was necessary because she could have been an official, a medical worker, a missionary, intent on stopping her practise her trade – pointed out to her that even the bras in vogue in the country had been colonised: 'They're all uplift and points like the nose of mortar shells – the style that went out at home with hula hoops!'

When Kate went to the room where Solange lived, she expected something like the brothels of Amsterdam: a pallet spread with a white sheet, a bidet on a stand, a towel, a mirror, a curtain, a calendar with a photograph of a Swiss chalet or a Cotswold lane. She travelled there alongside her in a different cyclo; through the swirling putty water her

wrinkled old driver pedalled. The cyclo drivers were either too old or too young to be conscripted, and as this meant a pensioner or a child, Kate sat back helplessly pricked by the sight of the man's chicken calves as she was drawn through the muddy torrent and the hooting, kerosene fog of traffic by someone for whom she'd give up her seat on the tube if she was at home. 'What else can you do?' Richard said to her when she moped about it. 'Don't be silly. They need the money, your hire puts bread on their plate, rice in their ricebowl. There are quite enough beggars round the place without your helping to create more by refusing to ride the cyclos. Come on.'

It turned out that Solange lived in a small wooden cabin on legs, polished and plain and flat-bottomed, like the cobbles built for easy beaching Kate had known as a child on summer holidays in Yorkshire, but stranded here under a canopy of banana and some flowering trees, with her mother and two children, one who looked about five, the other a baby, an infant, but mute with the slate-blank eyes she knew from other children in the city streets. Solange showed her a photograph of the elder child's father, resorted to bargirl slang to describe their sweet and eternal love: 'You are my number one baby, my oochy poochy sweetiepie,' she chanted, quoting him. 'Solange, my honeypot, you're good enough to lick all over.' He was about twenty in the army snapshot, with a moustache, a white GI with an Italian name. He had been going to volunteer for a second tour; he'd promised to send money for Tony Junior; she was still waiting, still hoping, though it had clearly been years. Oh, it was so bloody typical, such utter stale buns, Kate could have slapped Solange. She had hoped that she was making it up, that she didn't know who the father was, she'd rather her life was a racket, wanton anarchy, ferocious, cynical chaos, than have her duped and asking for more. Yet wanting to hit her, Kate saw, was the invitation her swaying sweet baby-talking presence issued, the drowned kitten seductiveness she'd learned.

Meanwhile, Solange's mother, in black pyjamas, was squealing and flapping at the child until he went outside again holding the baby and stopped gawping at the roundeye woman with their mother. When had she started work again after this infant? Kate saw a gash, imagined tender walls, sore breasts, and firmly set such thoughts aside.

'I no want im fight. Not like other kids,' said Solange. 'Soon he go to army, get killed.' She pointed at the child who was now holding the baby in his arms. 'Junior eight years old now.' It was less hot in her hut than outside, but her lip was pearly, and she wiped her face with a towel, then handed the aluminium waterpot to her mother to fill from the standpipe in the street outside.

Kate was large for the room; she became aware of her heft as she sat on the stool Solange indicated, and waited while the pot began to rattle on the primus lit on the step outside. The boy was now playing under the eave of the hut's floor; looking for ants, for spiders. He'd left the baby

lying on the ground on a mat in the shade of the wall. Solange said, 'She sleep now.'

The bed was in the corner; there was a curtain, a picture, of a Filippino Lippi Madonna. Solange was clearly better off than some of the other girls, who worked the alleys and were firmly kept from even the veranda of the hotel. She still had her teeth, for one thing. 'The blowjob experts have them pulled,' one of the other guests in the hotel had informed her one night. 'When they're kids. The earlier the better. Soldiers don't like taking those kind of risks.'

At Solange's she was drinking tea from a cup with a dragon pattern on it like the set her parents had in Hebden Bridge; it was a different shape, however, more like an eggcup. She wondered what Solange did on the bed in the corner; she thought about her mother and the children in the room with her. She had seen families, all curled up together, kindle-like, using one another's legs and backs for pillows, sometimes out by the traffic on the pavement where it was cooler than under the tin roofs of the shanties. They could sleep through a lot; they had learned to sleep through the mortar explosions since the shelters had been flooded out and the attacks were gradually closing in, the centre of the city coming into range.

'You take him home with you, Kate. You call up Tony. Then Tony Junior go to college, go with you.'

'I live in England.'

'England, America, same, same. Yes? You rich. You take him when you go England. Him learn quick.'

Tony Junior had come in again, encumbered by the baby, who clung to him like a growth.

Kate nodded, but said, 'I can't, Solange. It isn't possible. I'm sorry.'

When she left, she gave her \$20, two, three tricks' worth, maybe more. The boy ran for a cyclo. Solange smoothed the note between her pale slender fingers and smiled. She tapped a tooth, gold, as was fashionable. 'I sell this, bribe officials, stop him go army.'

The city was full of business; though there were shortages, there was also surplus, and bartering was brisk on the pavements. Medicines beyond their due date lay on rush mats in neat piles like towers of toy bricks, beside varied anatomies of hardware and dead soldiers' paraphernalia – contraband watches, radios, hi-fis, compasses, electrical parts and bicycle parts, recharged batteries, boots, coats, wallets, belts – as well as rebottled Dewar's and Black Label and Jim Crow and Kentucky sour mash with the wrong screwtops. Their minders were mostly children, boys. With small, lithe hands, the vendors would clutch at her arm, and screech at her, begging her to buy. If she didn't want anything from their display of wares, they had plenty more stuff elsewhere they could fetch, they had anything she might want. This was the world of the jokes she overheard,

'You want my little sister? No? You want my little brother? You want nice big smack- cheap, cheap? You like sucky sucky?'

Girl children were not so visible; they were indoors, she supposed, under protection or already conducting curtained business of their own. In the market, the slimy, fetid, sprawling down-town market in the Chinese quarter of the city, there was still plenty of food for sale, much strangling of various fowl and gutting of fish, crabs lumbering in wicker cages and jackfruit splitting at the seams and ripely adding to the mixed perfumes in the contrived darkness. The first time Kate went, she was attracted by the toys, the heaps of paper boats and houses, horses and mobiles, figures of men and women made of indigo- and cochineal-dyed rice paper stitched by hand. She bought a rider on a stiff-legged steed, a pagoda, and a bundle of paper money in brilliant scarlet with gold-leaf stamps on it, while the market women roared with laughter at her, calling out names. Later she was told, 'They were shouting "Peasant" - because of your hat.' (She had taken to wearing a tribal straw hat against the sun.) She also learned, from another informant, that her toys were funerary offerings: 'The gooks burn them on the pyre, so that the dead can take that stuff to heaven with them. It's symbolism, far-out Buddhist symbolism.' Kate took them up to her hotel room, still loyal to their delicate craft, though she realised they wouldn't travel well.

Solange's boy was the first child Kate was offered. There were no babies arranged on the rush mats and no booths at the market which dangled them for sale. But as goods, babies came her way, along with other things she could have tried if she had a fancy to. She was never offered a girl baby, however. Her own singular state remained intact, if anything became deeper. When she commented to Richard, after the third child she was asked to take, that she was surprised they were all boys, he said, 'It stands to reason. They don't want them to be called up. It's a good story. I should write it. But it's Human Interest, and the paper wants War Games - the Allied Strategy, the Body Count, the Weapon Stockpile, the odds on a ceasefire, etc. Why don't you do it? It'd keep you busy.'

'I've never written an article,' she said.

'You write law reports, you brief barristers. You know how to string your thoughts together on paper.'

She began to listen in on the talk in the hotel.

'Where can you get contraception in the city?' she asked.

One of the wire men answered, after a mock display of shock, 'Anywhere and everywhere. They're free at the PX; they're in every bar that's got a john, and the girls have got them on them.'

'So why's the birth rate so high?'

Then she met Jinty, and found comfort in the company of another woman. Jinty was short and plump and solid like a riding mistress; her hair clasped her head closely as if used to a hard hat. She came from

Surrey, and lived in Cobham when she was at home, among gorse bushes and pines. But she specialised in children in crisis, famine relief, and the administration of foreign aid. The charity organisation called Sangrail had sent her to this war, to see if there was any way through the political deadlock; the charities' money to the government was routinely siphoned off, money to the rebels was against UN rules; the counter-insurgents were holed up in villages badly needing supplies of all kinds, but officially they did not exist, so it was not possible even to put into gear any means of helping civilians in the territory they held. After a month of impasse with officials, when Kate met her at a function in the Canadian envoy's villa Jinty was concentrating her attention on the city's orphanages. 'I'm practical,' she told her. 'Wrangling with colonels isn't my cup of tea at all. I don't want to waste time wittering, though the Lord knows I still have to do a heck of a lot of it.'

The next day, Kate went with her to a children's hospital, down the side streets heavy with kerosene and chuming with cyclos, to the old European quarter of the city, where three Belgian nuns in a convent founded in the last century were nursing foundlings, some of whom had been left on their doorstep, while others had been brought in from the war, from burned villages, from the evacuated rebel-held countryside.

'It doesn't interest me, who wins,' Jinty was saying. 'Does it you? No? Good. Let the generals argue the toss with one another. There's plenty to be done while they chinwag.'

They were at the door of the infirmary. In Italy, at the Innocenti hospital in one of the northern towns, Kate had once seen the special compartment in the door, where the babies used to be put. It was like a night safe in a bank's outer wall – the packet was passed through without one party seeing the other. But here there was no sign of the place's purpose, of the bundled children delivered to the step, as she had half expected. The nun who came to open the door to them wasn't a foreigner, but a native, wearing a grey veil and pearl-headed pins to secure it to the white wimple that covered her ears and neck. She kissed Jinty, and left one hand on her shoulder with lingering tenderness; they exchanged words in French, and Kate recognised in the missionary's voice the West African accent of fellow students from her days at Gray's Inn.

'Soeur Philippe,' the nun introduced herself. The skin of her palm was dry and hard. 'Come and see our children.' She had that way of smiling nuns catch from statues: beatific, and without a trace of laughter.

This first infirmary gave model treatment, compared to other establishments Kate was to visit. At first she thought she was doing as Richard said, and gathering material for an article on the plight of the abandoned children and orphans of the war, but soon she found that without consciously embarking on helping Jinty, she was running errands and carrying out certain tasks for her. There was, as Jinty had said, plenty to do. In the Belgian nuns' hospital the children lay two to a cot, one at

each end, on a sheet, with a nappy on and a bottle each tied to a strut in the cot's side near their mouth; most of them were far too weak to reach the teat even if they were developed enough to roll or otherwise make a move towards it. So someone had to go round and try to fit the babies' mouths to their feed and stimulate them to suck. There wasn't time to pick a child up and nurse him – or her – individually; there were far too many in need. Starvation had turned their clocks back; they looked like medical photographs of gestating embryos, with huge frontal lobes and tiny sperm-like limbs. She could have scooped one of them into the palms of her hands like a frog.

'You see, they are frequently born premature. The mothers are not eating enough, in their bodies they are – how shall I say – not healthy... Their way of life ...' Soeur Philippe joined her hands over her habit as if praying. 'They do not leave their children to die. No, they abandon them so that they have a chance to survive. Somewhere else. Here, or, if possible, in Europe, America. They dream... but, you know ...' She put out her hand and touched a baby's face; the open eyes, huge as an owl's, did not flicker. 'On fait de son mieux.'

Jinty was examining the register: 'I need to make a copy of the figures, to send to London. We must have facts. It's not to be believed otherwise.'

The nun shook her head. 'The register is out of date, it is hard to keep it up. We pray at the burials, of course, we remember all of them in our prayers. But the record – we don't have time for the record.' Jinty handed Kate the book, where in theory each child was to be entered – case history, weight, race, symptoms, treatment, outcome (discharge to another orphanage, or death). 'Make a few copies anyway – and come back.'

Kate took the ledger; she tried various shops with photocopiers, but none was working – contraband toner was harder to fake than bourbon and Coke – so eventually she went round to the daily briefing centre and used the journalists' office facilities, thinking how stupid she was not to have thought of that immediately. She was confused, the children had confused her, they made her feel lewd in her healthiness and her strength. The smell of them was still in her nostrils, the leaky milk-and-piss sickness of their feeble hold on life.

That night in the hotel she spoke up, from the table where she was sitting on her own – Richard had again gone up-country with a general to write up the regime's supposed progress – and she addressed the room, over the head of the Agence France Presse rep who was also dining on his own, directing her comments to the group of wire service journalists and other papers' stringers who were eating together. 'I saw about two hundred babies today,' she began. 'They've been abandoned in the last few months, since the offensive started. Most of them looked as if they were dying. They're mostly half black and half white. The mothers are all bargirls, apparently.'

'Yeah,' said one newspaperman. 'The whole fucking country's one big brothel. That's our present to the people: we teach the women how to fuck. That's freedom. That's a law of the free market.'

'Who's going to use a rubber when his life is on the line? It's tough.' This was another man, joining the conversation. 'Those guys, they want to leave something of themselves behind.' The veteran newspaperman, famous for hard-hitting coverage, spread his hands and shrugged.

Another put in, 'Two hundred? That's a lot of children. I reckon they're telling us something about what's happening out there. Nobody wants to get caught with anything incriminating on them when the end comes, now do they? And what would be more incriminating than a little roundeye babba with funny-coloured skin?'

The most famous reporter of all nodded at Kate and called out, 'It's like we wrote at the start of the war, it's still the same story. "You gotta destroy the village in order to save it." You gotta leave your fucking child if you want him to stay alive. The only safe place to be is elsewhere.'

The next day, Kate joined Jinty in a different orphanage, this one for babies and children who could feed themselves and obey their minder's order to sit in line on potties and perform. Many of these did not have foreign fathers, but had lost their parents, either through death during a raid or through dispersal, as they took flight from a village under attack or were scattered as they stole into the city at night for safety. The authorities in this establishment were secular, and local: The Good Fortune and Long Life Prudential Society.

'You should watch out,' one reporter said when she'd finished telling them. 'They'll bleed you for all you're worth, that little lot. It's Madam So-and-so's outfit, isn't it? Her good works, my ass. It's just a cover for far more important business. She's using it to launder – you take a little look at the books, little lady, and you see if you can make head or tail of the finances of the Good Fortune and Long Life Prudential Society – if they've got any books they'll let you see.'

When she brought it up with Jinty, the older woman replied, 'Journalists like plots. I'm not interested in plots, and the people aren't characters to me, they're not pieces on some almighty chessboard. Close your mind to them. If you think about who you're helping you'll never do a thing. There'll always be a good reason to sit on your bottom and do nothing.'

That day they also went to a city shelter for disabled children. These were orphans of all ages, and their handicaps were in some cases the results of wounds bombs, shrapnel, gas – but in other cases congenital or the result of neglect, of malnutrition. When Kate arrived in the former warehouse, the reek of disinfectant was overwhelming. It was dark inside, and though this at least helped keep down the temperature under the metal roof, the lack of windows made the atmosphere inside asphyxiating. First she noticed that the walls were dripping and the dirt floor was covered in a film of water tinged with the blue-grey bubbles of some toilet

cleansing fluid; then she saw that the children were soaking too, lying nappy-less on rubber sheets draped on iron bedsteads or on the floor, where ammoniac puddles had also collected.

'They hose them down in the morning,' Jinty told her. 'It's the quickest way to clean up the ones who are incontinent, and restore some level of hygiene to the premises.' She looked round the room, as Kate swallowed, and went on, 'Boys and girls are all mixed in together, so we can't vouch for another sort of hygiene.'

Jinty had commandeered a team of allied soldiers to plumb in showers and basins, linked to the standpipe in the street outside; Kate had accompanied her to the army depot and watched her rustling up the equipment, the parts and the fittings, from the sergeant on duty. They began moving the children from one side of their dark quarters to the other, to separate the boys from the girls. To the ones with power in their arms, Kate gave piggy-backs; their heads on her shoulders like stones, their breath distempered by starvation. One girl patted her hair, and said something softly, twisting her head around to smile in her eyes. She was admiring it, Kate realised, admiring it for its difference from her own, in lightness of colour and fluffiness of texture.

She helped put up a partition, to give some privacy to the older girls who had started to menstruate. It was built of tough cartons that had delivered something marked *Fragile* to the assisting army; they'd been salvaged from one of the many public dumps before someone else could take them to turn them into a whole family's shelter. Jinty, with a male army nurse she had also commandeered, was washing some of the children and covering them in clothing they had brought. On examination close up, many of their bodies were terribly damaged, but there were no dressings available, and only bleach for disinfectant. A softish, wadded parcel from England had miraculously passed through the thieving hands of customs and other authorities; it proved to be full of teddy bears.

Trying to tend the children, Kate was reminded of the heaps of rubbish behind the foreigners' haunts and near other places of abundance, like the market, where the natives swarmed to pick over the fruit and vegetables, the burst packaging, the rags and debris. The little boy lying prone on the rubber sheeting whom she began swabbing looked as if he had fallen from a tree on to stones where wasps and worms had feasted on the tears in his flesh. She clenched her teeth to stop herself gagging, her repugnance increased by shame that she should feel disgust at all.

Jinty noticed, and told her, kindly, 'Listen, old girl, no need to linger. You need time to get used to this sort of thing. Go on, have a breath of fresh air outside. If you can find some.'

Richard came back from his expedition to the counter-insurgents' territory. He was frustrated in his attempts to file, because the government censors had picked up his denunciations of the three-cornered civil war; he was

furious. In the hotel, the number of pressmen had grown; from the corner of the dining room where he was waited on by his companion, the proprietor now rewrote the hotel charges on a nightly basis as prices rose; the wines drunk improved in labels and vintage as he dug deeper into the last of the cellar. There was a trade in passports and visas at the bar; in other things as well. Contractors arrived and were busy; the beggars at the hotel door grew bolder, as did the rats, sometimes making an appearance before the dining room was empty to snatch at fallen scraps. The embassies notified their nationals to leave. 'You're to get out, Kate, there's no two ways about it,' said Richard. 'It's the end, and I've got to stay as long as I can. But you ...'

She tried to make love to him that night. She saw the children's bodies in her mind's eye, their gaze shadowless, like the moon in eclipse. She wanted the sap and the kick of sex to move this darkness and lift the heavy bodies of the orphans where they were lodged in her, torpid and undigested. But Richard wouldn't, he too lay leaden, a reproach to her, as if he were saying in his unresponsiveness, How could you at a time like this? She was half-thinking to herself, We should have a child ourselves, a strapping, crowing, pink-and-white child who knows how to express hunger and discomfort and ask for everything, not like these inert lumps of flesh in their silence and their stink. All the time she'd been with Jinty trying to help her with the orphans she'd never shed a tear. It had left her as numb and cold as if she were made of ten-day-old suet, and she hated herself for it and for not being able to get through to Richard: he was out there on the front line, fighting, even when he was in bed with her, and women had no place there, no, nor love either. So she wept now for herself, lying naked in the stifling room, hearing the distant boom and crackle of the mortars and the scratch of the rats in the walls.

I watch the big English who come one day see my mother drink tea with her I follow her offer her cigarettes the man gave me sell sell. She say no cigarettes but she give me two quarters an tell me no smoke myself have something eat she no recognise me I go with her she go to sisters' infirmary where they take babies she ask why you follow me I tell her you pretty woman you kind woman she laugh she say go away home I say please I come see you again tomorrow she say no no I say please again she gets angry shoo shoo little boy I no have more money I say please she no say name of hotel but I know where she stay (she no realise I know) but she say tomorrow she come one more time say goodbye she leaving she sad this country number one people in it so sweet and never complain she say. I find my mother home she sick now an I tell her and she say, Take Theresa so I take my sister mother give us money for cyclo, I only ride cyclo one time before and I tell driver go sisters' infirmary, he go and I leave Theresa in basket with blanket and other things on the step

first nobody come and I hidin by door nearby an waitin an watchin hopin big English come like she say an then I see her she hot she puff she stop an make little

cry when she see basket and baby then she pick up Theresa and hug Theresa an look in basket I wait see what she do then if she ring bell give Theresa to door sister she do she go in with sister they talk talk high voices big English I hear she cry again

my mother burn many offering she light candle though she sick she walk to church to make special prayer for Theresa The big English no want to take me I too grownup take care of things here now so mother pray she take Theresa and we all be leaving soon soon for to find Tony

After the fall of the city later that year, and the establishment of the new regime, Kate returned there to join Jinty, who had remained throughout, and to complete the adoption process of the child she had finally chosen when she found her lying on the steps of the Belgian nuns' infirmary on her last day in the city, just before she left because Richard – and the British government representatives too, to be fair to him insisted that she did. Jinty helped her with the paperwork; by the end, she'd spent some \$10,000, she reckoned, acquiring her daughter. But it was a small price to pay for Theresa, of course. That was her given name: it was written on a paper and plastic bracelet which must have been borrowed from a hospital and left in the basket, alongside one or two other tokens. Just like a fairytale, and the child did feel to her like a fairy boon, she had to admit. Theresa, who had lain there in her way as if predestined, who had put her arms around her neck confidently when she picked her up that first time as if she knew her and understood that she could care for her, that she would care for her. She had turned over inside at her touch: Theresa was like the spark in flint and she lit Kate back to life.

Jinty said, 'A lot of people bleat about uprooting children from their culture and whatever. Culture? When you haven't got enough to eat? When you'll be on the streets by the age of ten? Oh, they're dear, clever little things, and they might manage to survive, but what kind of a life will it be? Don't let the doubters and the purists torment you, you go ahead, Kate, give Theresa an English life, give her pony clubs, ballet classes, meat and two veg, Beefeaters, the battle of Trafalgar, the lot. Hell's bells, one has to believe in something. Besides, she's half-and-half anyway – her father could have been God knows what.'

When Theresa was six and began going to school all day, Kate took on full-time work for Sangrail as an expert on refugees, specialising in adoption and immigration law. Richard was usually travelling, still avoiding the conjunction of marriage, still covering the hot spots (but for another paper now – his old one had been taken over and now, in the interest of profits, used only news agencies' reports). So Kate decided she couldn't manage with only part-time help any longer, and began to employ a housekeeper. She picked her first from the large population of boat people whom she was helping to get the right papers for the country of their eventual choice; Kate knew her way through the red tape –

refugee law, immigration law, political asylum – and how to finger exactly the right subsection of the right bill for her client. Canada was very popular, and so were some of the Caribbean countries. It became her special field of expertise, and a trickle of women from Theresa's birthplace – and sometimes their husbands – had passed through her house and lived for a time in the basement flat. It wasn't an ideal relationship, of course. She would have preferred not to be an employer at all, a 'mistress', a 'madam'.

Kate sometimes thought of Solange and Noelle and wondered what had happened to them; how badly they had been punished for fraternisation, how well they had survived the new regime's 'lustration' programmes. She once or twice asked her contacts for news, but it was very difficult to trace someone when all you knew about her was that she had been a bargirl with a child or two, information which would not be the most helpful way to identify her, given the character of the new government.

One day a refugee liaison centre Kate worked with telephoned her about a case: an economics exchange student in Paris had applied for his mother to leave and join him. She wanted to work in England, she had a little English. He was making approaches to transfer his scholarship to LSE, in order to continue his studies. He was bright, and he was resolved, at present, to return to his country; he had prospects and he was not seeking residency or citizenship for himself. As for his mother, he had specifically given them Kate's name as a possible sponsor. Would she take up the case?

Madame Ng's first name was Phong; she arrived to start her post as housekeeper in the summer holidays of Theresa's eleventh year (or what was thought to be her eleventh year, on the basis of a conjectured age of three months when she was found). Kate interviewed her beforehand; she asked her how she and her son had known about her. Phong smiled: she had heard about Kate in the city, everyone had. Kate was straining to catch something that seemed familiar in Phong's face, something that sounded familiar in her voice, but every time she thought she caught a flicker, it passed. It was like trying to remember a name; it's on the tip of your tongue but it just won't form itself. She dismissed the fleeting resemblance as fantasy, stirred up by a yearning for reparation, a sense of loss, of the page irrevocably turned. Kate thought then that she might never be able to stop feeling this ... interconnectedness with the women in the city who had lived those lives and had the babies – it wasn't guilt, exactly, but something shared, as if when she was holding Theresa she wanted to turn into one of them and look in the mirror and find herself changed to match her daughter.

Phong looked so much older than Solange would have been, with her hair cut short and straight and her torso slightly bent – an abdominal operation had left a lumpy scar, so she listed forward when she walked as if to shield her vulnerable tissue from bumps and angles. Kate

sometimes found herself scanning her, wondering about Theresa's real mother, and her imagination would begin to whirr and she'd have to tell herself to stop it, stop it. That way madness lies: a hall of mirrors and no end to the reflections.

Phong was very proud of her son, quite rightly; and the new regime's debriefing about America had impressed her deeply. She didn't want to emigrate there, unlike some of her predecessors, but to stay in London and work for Kate. That was what she said, what she insisted she wanted. It was hard to get work papers for her, but Kate promised to do her best (though she also pointed out to her that housekeeper/ nanny wasn't the best-paid job in the world, especially at the wages Kate could afford, nor the most rewarding in other ways).

Theresa soon outstripped her new nanny in height – in spite of her puny size in the first year of life, she'd since been nourished on muesli and kiwi and other vitamin-rich foodstuffs and had grown rangy in limb, with a light sheen on her skin like a hazelnut. Moving with the quicksilver energy of childhood, she tended to be impatient with her refugee minders, especially with their lack of English and their timorous ways of negotiating London transport systems, and Kate would have to scold her and teach her to make allowances for newcomers. But from the start Phong seemed to dust off the little girl's prickliness. 'I love Mummy best, this much,' Theresa would say, stretching her arms wide. 'Then Daddy, this much' – bringing them in a little – 'And then you, Phong, this much!' She'd then stretch them out again, hooting. One time, playing this game, her mouth was full of spring rolls Phong had cooked for her, and Kate stood in the doorway, watching her at the kitchen table as Phong dished up another. 'You eat now, Theresa, and don't chit-chat so much,' responded Phong, already busy scouring the pan at the sink.

Kate felt a tweak of jealousy, but she squashed it. It would be stupid to mind that Theresa at last had a nanny she really seemed to like. She had always wanted her to feel something in common with the people she came from. And after all, it was the dream of every working mother to find someone who could stand in for her, when she couldn't be there all the time to take care of her child herself.